



United States
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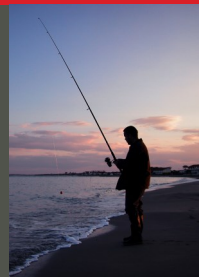
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Helping People Help the Land



JULY 2015

Activity **report**



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Programs

The pre-proposal application period of FY 16 RCPP has passed as of July 8th. States are expected to review and evaluate potential projects that elected to go to the state pool by July 24th. At this time, NHQ has not released the list of applicants that will be coming to Texas, but that is expected on July 13th. We are expecting several as we have been working with several partners on potential projects. Program participation is much higher than last year. NHQ will announce those proposals selected for full proposal requests by September 4th. They will have until November 13th to submit a full proposal for evaluation. It is expected that funding selections will be made in late January or early February.

We are wrapping up EQIP for FY 16. All of the \$76M allocated to Texas has been approved for contracts. The field is working rapidly to tie up this funding as the end of the fiscal year is rapidly approaching. We have requested additional funding from NHQ - \$30M – to address our backlog of applications. At this time, no additional funding is expected.

We have two application periods in CSP that we are working diligently to address. One is the open sign-up for FY 15 and the other is contract renewals for FY 16. We are making good progress in getting these applications evaluated and ranked and of over 590, we have over 370 completed. The renewals are not quite as cumbersome and we have over 100 current program participants interested in renewing their contracts for an additional 5 years.

Program activities are keeping the field busy now and until the end of the calendar year.



Partnership Provides Agricultural Landowners Conservation Assistance in Lower Rio Grande Valley

Agricultural landowners and land managers in a 4-county area of the Texas Rio Grande Valley will have the opportunity to receive technical and financial assistance to help protect, improve and enhance their agricultural lands. Through this conservation stewardship effort landowners can improve the water quality and quantity that flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) announces the 2015 Lower Rio Grande Valley Water Improvement Initiative as part of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, or RCPP. NRCS in Texas will begin ranking applications for financial assistance and obligating contracts after July 17, 2015. All agriculture producers interested in submitting a program participation application for 2015 should do so before the July 17 deadline.

NRCS will be working with Texas Water Resources Institute, other Initiative partners and private landowners to provide specialists and funding to improve nutrient management and agricultural water use efficiency through improved irrigation scheduling and use of innovative irrigation techniques and technologies that decrease water use, improve productivity, and reduce irrigation return flows thus reducing nutrient and sediment loading to local waterbodies.

The Initiative will focus on a portion of Kenedy County, along with Cameron, Hidalgo, Counties of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas and includes the lower Rio Grande River, Arroyo Colorado, and north Floodway, all of which are important sources of freshwater inflow for the lower Laguna Madre and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. According to the 2012 Ag Census, there are more than 317,000 irrigated acres in this region.

“This project focuses on an extensive partnership network to provide funding and technical expertise to



both conserve water resources and improve water quality,” said Salvador Salinas, Texas NRCS State Conservationist. “In addition to environmental benefits, this effort will have a significant economic impact on the local economy.”

For more information, including eligibility requirements, visit the USDA Service Center office in your county. Service center locations and program information can be found on the Texas NRCS Web site at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov.

Watershed Dams Saved Texans Estimated \$40 Million in Flood Damage

The month of May was one for the Texas record books. It will go down in history as the wettest May on record, shattering all previous records. Rainfall totals of 15 to 20 inches were documented across the state with many areas receiving more than their average annual rainfall in May alone.

According to the National Weather Service in Fort Worth, over 35 trillion gallons of rain fell across Texas in May, which is enough water to cover the entire state of Texas in eight inches of water.

The story that hasn't been told is about the damage that *didn't* happen thanks to 2,041 watershed dams across the state that quietly functioned as they were designed to do.

"The more than 2,000 dam sites across the state that were affected by the rainfall provided at least \$40 million in estimated damage reduction benefits from storms throughout the month of May," says NRCS Landscape Conservation and Planning Leader Lori Ziehr. "Savings include road and bridge damage reduction, reduced loss of crops and livestock and damages to homes."

Additionally, the structures also provide improved recreation, water supplies and wildlife habitat. Texas watershed dams annually provide over \$140 million in benefits to the state.

According to Ziehr, in addition to the existing 2,041 watershed dam sites, the state would have realized an additional \$20 million in damage reduction savings if the 266 planned dams awaiting funding had been constructed.

"These structures continue to reduce the impacts of flooding, and they are complimented by conservation practices within the watershed that reduce erosion and



improve water quality," says John Mueller, NRCS State Conservation Engineer. "These watershed dams are an important part of our state's infrastructure – millions of people depend on them for protection from floods and for providing clean drinking water."

In addition to the Federal government, the State of Texas recognizes the importance of these structures and has made great efforts to help maintain them for the safety of all Texans. In 2010 the Texas Legislature approved funding for the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) to assist these watershed dam sponsors in caring for the structures.

"Since then, the TSSWCB Flood Control Program has provided local watershed sponsors \$8 million for maintenance, and \$22 million for repair and rehabilitation of the watershed program dams," states John Foster, TSSWCB program officer. "The State Flood Control Program has played an important role to ensure that the dams function properly during extreme conditions, such as those we have recently experienced."

Lesser Prairie-Chicken Population Continues to Climb

The population of the lesser prairie-chicken is on the rise, according to survey results released last week by the [Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies](#) (WAFWA). Based on aerial surveys, biologists estimate the lesser prairie-chicken numbers about 29,000, a 25 percent increase from 2014.

WAFWA commissioned the [annual survey](#), which showed increases in three of the four ecoregions the bird inhabits. The sand sage prairie region of southeastern Colorado showed the biggest gain with about a 75 percent increase between 2014 and 2015.

“This year’s increase, on the heels of last year’s 20 percent increase, is evidence of the species’ ability to rapidly recover from downturns as a result of drought and poor range condition,” said Ross Melinchuk, chairman of WAFWA’s Lesser Prairie-Chicken Council.

The lesser prairie-chicken population has declined over several decades because of loss of habitat, and in 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the iconic Great Plains bird as threatened. Severe drought in 2012 also had negative impacts on the bird.

Tracking the population of the lesser prairie-chicken is key to the species’ recovery. It provides a baseline and helps government agencies and other groups measure the impacts of conservation efforts.

USDA’s [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) works with ranchers in Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico to make conservation improvements to their land that benefit both the lesser prairie-chicken and the ranching operation. With 95 percent of the lesser prairie-chicken’s current range on private lands, these conservation efforts can have a tremendous benefit for the species.

“Lesser prairie-chickens depend very heavily on private lands for their habitats, and we’ve found that through sustainable grazing management, ranches can provide critical habitat for them,” said Christian Hagen, science

adviser for the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Initiative (LPCI).

Through LPCI, NRCS has invested more than \$20 million to help ranchers improve habitat and ranchland sustainability on nearly 950,000 acres since 2010.

“When ranchers restore habitat for the lesser prairie-chicken, it leads to other environmental benefits such as cleaner air and water and healthier soil, while also helping ranchers make their operations more efficient and productive,” said John Ungerer, LPCI coordinator for NRCS. “Keeping private lands agriculture profitable and in business while providing species conservation, Now, that’s a win-win.”

Key to LPCI is the partnership among NRCS, WAFWA and other groups. These groups provide a unified and targeted approach to prairie chicken management and conservation.

“By working collaboratively, our goal is that the lesser prairie-chicken’s population fully recovers while ensuring the nation’s working lands remain resilient,” Ungerer said. “We’ve seen wildlife successes across the country, and we’re confident in the power of voluntary conservation on private lands.”



A recent survey commissioned by WAFWA shows lesser prairie-chicken numbers climbed 25 percent between 2014 and 2015. NRCS photo.

Have Rain Will Travel

By Dee Ann Littlefield, Public Affairs Specialist

They can't control the weather, but they can make it rain. Or at least simulate a rainfall event.

Four Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in north central Texas have purchased a traveling Rainfall Simulator, thanks to \$6,000 investments from the SWCDs and an \$8,000 grant from the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board.

"We see this as an exciting opportunity to take this hands-on education system to many events at schools, civic events and other opportunities," says Lower Clear Fork of the Brazos SWCD Board Chairman Monte McIntire. "We are excited to provide this traveling unit to any outlet in north central Texas."



Over the years as an employee of the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Albany District Conservationist Troy Reinke had witnessed firsthand the powerful education benefits a rainfall simulator could provide. With no such traveling systems in the area, he began to research options and approached his local SWCD board about funding for such a system.

As he shared the idea with the other SWCD boards and Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board (TSSWCB) field representative Charlie Upchurch, they all felt the same way – they were all for it. After thoroughly researching the different systems, the Lower Clear Fork/Brazos, Jack, Throckmorton and Young SWCD boards each put up \$1,500 towards the purchase of a traveling rainfall simulator system that is completely portable and housed in a self-contained trailer, equipped with water and electricity.

The Lower Clear Fork/Brazos SWCD had submitted a grant request to the TSSWCB for a Water Quality Initiative Grant (offered through EPA Section 319 Clean Water Act Nonpoint Source program funding) to add to the \$6,000 they had put together. The \$8,000 grant they received helped the SWCDs make the decision to purchase the trailer to go with the rainfall simulator, which will make it portable and effective even in remote settings.

"This will be a great education tool," says John Foster, TSSWCB Program Officer. "NRCS and District employees can use this system to offer a very visual simulation of soil erosion and the effects various land management practices and soil health have on water quality."

Reinke, as well as fellow NRCS and District employees are excited for the opportunity to showcase the rainfall simulator. The system will be housed at the Albany Service Center and is available for rent from any of the Young, Jack, Throckmorton, or Lower Clear Fork/Brazos SWCD offices. Anyone interested in requesting the unit can contact SWCD or NRCS staff in the Albany, Breckenridge, Graham, Jacksboro or Throckmorton Service Centers. The unit rents for \$350 day and may include staff to help deliver presentations.

"This will be a great opportunity to showcase conservation benefits at field days, workshops, school events, Rotary or Kiwanis Club meetings," Reinke says. "We hope lots of organizations will take advantage of this new system."

Contact information for each county office can be found at www.tx.nrcs.usda.gov or by emailing Chawn Jobe with the Young SWCD at young@swcd.texas.gov

Something Fishy Going On

*By Dee Ann Littlefield,
NRCS Public Affairs Specialist*

After four years of severe drought, recent rainfall has Clay County landowners optimistic about the future.

“Everyone has pretty much been in survival mode,” says Luke Halsell, rancher and Little Wichita Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) board chairman. “But now the country is greening up and people are feeling a lot better about things.”

The District annually sells seed through a working agreement with Turner Seed Company. They also try to have an annual fish sale. The District receives a percentage of the sales to help with their operating expenses.

With Mother Nature cooperating, the District had record sales with both seed and fish this spring. Farmers and ranchers stocked up buying nearly \$40,000 in fish from the District and \$35,000 in seed sales.

“We haven’t even had a fish sale in several years,” says Halsell. “It has been so dry nobody could even think about fishing; we were just hoping to have enough water for our livestock.”

The District sold largemouth bass, channel catfish, black crappie, blue gill sunfish, red ear sunfish, fathead minnows and golden shiners. Most ranchers stocked up anticipating some great family fishing with kids and grandkids for years to come. NRCS staff assisted customers with fish species and stocking rates for the ponds.

The wet spring also prompted landowners to plant areas of ground that needed some cover. The NRCS staff regularly provided technical assistance to help landowners know what types of seeds to plant in various soil types to achieve their land management goals.

“People are starting to understand the benefits of having a diverse cover on their land,” says NRCS District Conservationist Kenny Prewitt. “They were ordering diverse seed mixes with legumes and forbs, in addition to the tall grasses.”

The seeds had excellent germination conditions. The area received nearly 20” of rain in the month of May and had a very wet June as well.

Little Wichita SWCD board member Keith Davis purchased fish for his stock ponds.



Little Wichita SWCD employee Brandon Dunn helps with fish delivery.

